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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5754
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMCONSUL CASABLANCA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000325

FOR NEA/ENA

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT SHAKE-UP: OBSERVERS SEE INCREASINGLY
TECHNOCRATIC CABINET AS SIGN OF BEN ALI'S TIGHT GRIP ON
DECISION-MAKING.

REF: TUNIS 191

(U) CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

11. (C) IN NUMEROUS CONVERSATIONS SINCE THE JANUARY 23
GOVERNMENT RESHUFFLING (REFTEL), TUNISIAN AND DIPLOMATIC
OBSERVERS HAVE ALMOST INVARIABLY DESCRIBED THE SHAKE-UP AS
SOMETHING OF A GAME OF MUSICAL CHAIRS AND A SIGN OF PRESIDENT
BEN ALI'S FIRM PERSONAL CONTROL OVER THE POLITICAL SITUATION
IN THE COUNTRY. SEVERAL HAVE DESCRIBED THE SHIFTS AS
INDICATING THAT THE CABINET IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY
TECHNOCRATIC, BUT ARE OF TWO MINDS ABOUT THE IMPLICATION OF
THIS. ON ONE HAND, MINISTERS AND, ESPECIALLY, SECRETARIES OF
STATE (JUNIOR MINISTERS) ARE INCREASINGLY INDIVIDUALS WHO
HAVE COME UP THROUGH THE BUREAUCRACY AND ARE SEEN AS
COMPETENT IN THEIR FIELD, A PLUS FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION
OF PROGRAMS. ON THE OTHER HAND, THAT MEANS, ACCORDING TO
SOME OBSERVERS, THAT THEY ARE ONLY IMPLEMENTERS OF POLICY
DECISIONS MADE BY THE PRESIDENT, NOT DECISION-MAKERS OR
POLITICAL FIGURES THEMSELVES, MEANING A GREATER CONSOLIDATION
OF POLITICAL DECISIONS IN BEN ALI'S HANDS. WE SHARE THE
ASSESSMENT OF MANY THAT THE MOST INFLUENTIAL FIGURES IN THE
TUNISIAN LEADERSHIP ARE OUTSIDE THE CABINET. END SUMMARY.

INCREASINGLY TECHNOCRATIC
CABINET--FOR BETTER OR WORSE

12. (C) THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLE SPECULATION ABOUT
PRESIDENT BEN ALI'S JANUARY 23 GOVERNMENT RESHUFFLING, IN
WHICH THREE SENIOR MINISTERS LEFT GOVERNMENT, NINE MOVED
LATERALLY TO OTHER POSITIONS, AND 11 NEW JUNIOR MINISTER
POSITIONS WERE CREATED (FOR A TOTAL OF 30 FULL MINISTERS AND
24 JUNIOR MINISTERS). SOME OBSERVERS, BOTH TUNISIAN AND
FOREIGN DIPLOMATS, DESCRIBED THE CHANGES AS LITTLE MORE THAN
MUSICAL CHAIRS, BUT MANY SAW A PURPOSE BEHIND THE JUGGLING.
AN EGYPTIAN EMBASSY OFFICER AND FRENCH EMBASSY POLITICAL
COUNSELOR EACH OPINED THAT BEN ALI ENGAGED IN SUCH JUGGLING
BOTH IN ORDER TO DEMONSTRATE THAT HE REMAINS FULLY IN CHARGE
AND, ON A MORE POSITIVE NOTE, TO GIVE BROADER EXPERIENCE IN
GOVERNMENT TO SEASONED MINISTERS. WHILE BOTH COLLEAGUES
PRAISED THE COMPETENCE AND EXPERTISE OF THE INCREASINGLY
TECHNOCRATIC CABINET, THEY SAW IT AS A CLEAR SIGN THAT ALL
POLICY DECISIONS ARE MADE BY THE PRESIDENT IN CONSULTATION
WITH A CLOSE CIRCLE OF ADVISERS, MANY OF WHOM ARE NOT
MINISTERS. THE MINISTERS ARE THERE TO IMPLEMENT DECISIONS
MADE ELSEWHERE.

13. (C) ALONG THE SAME LINES, TAIEB ZAHAR, PUBLISHER OF THE
WEEKLY INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE, "REALITES," TOLD LABATT THAT HE
SEES THE LATEST RESHUFFLING AS THE CONSOLIDATION OF BEN ALI'S
GRADUAL MOVE TO FILL THE CABINET WITH TECHNOCRATS WHO ARE
GOOD AT IMPLEMENTING DECISIONS BUT PLAY NO REAL POLITICAL

ROLE. HE SAID THAT WITH THE DEPARTURE FROM THE CABINET OF MINISTER OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS, CHADLI NEFFATI, THERE WAS VIRTUALLY NO ONE LEFT (EXCEPT MINISTER OF DEFENSE DALY JAZI AND MINISTER OF EDUCATION, MONDER ROUISSI) WHO CAME INTO THE CABINET FROM OUTSIDE THE BUREAUCRACY. THERE IS NO ONE, HE ARGUED, WHO ROSE THROUGH A PRIVATE ASSOCIATION (COMMENT: THE TWO WOMEN MINISTERS ARE AN EXCEPTION, AS THEY ROSE THROUGH THE RCD-AFFILIATED NATIONAL UNION OF TUNISIAN WOMEN. END COMMENT), THE LABOR UNION MOVEMENT, OR EVEN BUSINESS. ZAHAR ARGUED THAT, EVEN IN OTHER NON-DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES, ONE CAN SEE WITHIN A CABINET EVIDENCE OF POLITICAL TENDENCIES OR "FIEFDOMS," WHETHER REGIONAL OR PERSONAL, BUT THAT BEN ALI HAS VIRTUALLY ELIMINATED ANYONE'S ABILITY TO BUILD ANY INDEPENDENT POLITICAL OR EVEN REGIONAL LOYALTIES. ZAHAR ARGUED THAT TECHNOCRATS ARE IMPORTANT TO IMPLEMENT THE POLICY, BUT THAT POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS SHOULD BE IN THE MINISTERIAL MIX AS WELL.

OUT IS NEVER OUT

14. (C) WHILE MANY FOREIGN PRESS REPORTS ON THE SHAKE-UP FOCUSED ON THE DEPARTURE OF FORMER MINISTER OF INTERIOR ABDULLAH KALLEL OR THE MOVEMENT OF DALY JAZI FROM PRESIDENTIAL COUNSELOR TO THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE (NOT CONSIDERED BY SOME A KEY PORTFOLIO BECAUSE, IN THIS VIEW, PROFESSIONAL, APOLITICAL MILITARY OFFICERS IN SENIOR POSITIONS ACTUALLY RUN THE MINISTRY), TUNISIAN OBSERVERS GENERALLY DISMISS EFFORTS TO INTERPRET THESE MOVES AS INDICATIVE OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S RISE OR FALL IN FAVOR. MANY CURRENT AND FORMER GOVERNMENT MINISTERS HAVE MOVED IN AND OUT OF THE CABINET OVER THE YEARS. OBSERVERS HAVE NOTED THAT THIS FOLLOWS BEN ALI'S DESIRE TO KEEP PEOPLE MOVING. ZAHAR AND MONDER KALAI, A PRESS OFFICER AT THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, IN A SEPARATE CONVERSATION, EACH SAID HE BELIEVED THAT BEN ALI WAS IN FACT MOVING SOME OF HIS CLOSEST COUNSELORS OUT OF MINISTERIAL POSITIONS SO THAT THEY COULD FOCUS ON ADVISING HIM WITHOUT BEING BURDENED BY THE DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS OF A MINISTRY. ZAHAR CITED KALLEL AS AN EXAMPLE: HE REMAINS A CLOSE SECURITY ADVISER TO BEN ALI, BUT AS MINISTER OF INTERIOR WAS ALSO RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE COUNTRY THROUGH THE GOVERNORS AND DISTRICT COMMISSIONERS, ALL OF WHOM REPORT UP TO THE MINISTER. KALAI WENT FURTHER, REFERRING TO BEN ALI'S ADVISORS AS HIS "SHADOW CABINET," AND NAMED KALLEL, JAZY, PRESIDENTIAL MINISTER/COUNSELOR ABDELAZIZ BEN DHIA, AND PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESMAN ABDELWAHAB ABDULLAH AS AMONG THOSE WHO PLAY KEY ROLES IN ASSISTING BEN ALI IN ARRIVING AT DECISIONS. THIS WOULD TRACK WITH THE NOVEMBER 1999 DECISION TO MOVE FORMER PRIME MINISTER HAMED KAROUI TO THE NON-SUBSTANTIVE (BUT VERY SENIOR) POSITION OF VICE PRESIDENT OF THE RCD, APPOINTING ECONOMIC TECHNOCRAT MOHAMED GHANNOUCHI (WHO ONLY RECENTLY JOINED THE POLITBURO OF THE RCD) TO RUN THE GOVERNMENT AS PRIME MINISTER.

SPECULATION ABOUT
PLANNING FOR 2004

15. (C) ZAHAR CITED ANOTHER FACTOR IN THE GOVERNMENT RESHUFFLING AND THE SHAKE-UP IN LEADERSHIP AT THE RULING PARTY THAT OCCURRED THE SAME WEEK: PLANNING FOR THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. IN THE LAST MONTH OR TWO SEVERAL OPPOSITION LEADERS, RANGING FROM ISMAIL BOULAHIA OF THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT (MDS) AND MOHAMED BOUCHIHA OF THE POPULAR UNITY PARTY (BOTH SEEN AS CLOSE TO THE GOVERNMENT) TO RACHID KHACHANA OF THE PROGRESSIVE SOCIALIST RALLY (RSP) HAVE TOLD LABATT THAT THEY BELIEVE BEN ALI IS PREPARING THE GROUND WORK FOR A POPULAR REFERENDUM EXEMPTING HIM FROM THE CONSTITUTIONAL THREE-TERM LIMIT AND "DEMANDING" THAT HE RUN FOR A FOURTH (ELECTED) TERM IN 2004. UNDER THIS ANALYSIS, ACCORDING TO BOTH ZAHAR AND KELAI (AND THE OPPOSITION LEADERS) BEN ALI IS GATHERING AROUND HIMSELF THE PEOPLE WHO WOULD ORGANIZE THIS MOVE POLITICALLY AND JURIDICALLY. ZAHAR CITED BEN DHIA (WHOSE RESPONSIBILITIES AS CHIEF OF STAFF WERE SPLIT OFF TO AHMED IYADH OEDERNI) AS THE "LAWYER" WHO WOULD

MAKE SURE ALL WAS DONE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW, WHILE KALLEL PLAYS HIS TRADITIONAL ROLE OF "ENFORCER" (ASSISTED BY SECRETARY OF STATE GHANZOU, WHO REMAINS NUMBER TWO AT THE MINISTRY) TO PREVENT DISSENT WITHIN THE PARTY OR OTHER RANKS.

RUMORS ABOUT PERSONAL/
REGIONAL TIES TO BEN ALI

16. (C) AS WITH ALL DEVELOPMENTS IN TUNISIA, THERE HAS BEEN A WEALTH OF SPECULATION AND RUMOR ABOUT ALLEGED TIES CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS HAVE TO THE PRESIDENT, HIS WIFE, OR HIS HOME REGION OF SOUSSE. CONTACTS RANGING FROM EMBASSY FSN'S TO EUROPEAN AMBASSADORS HAVE ATTRIBUTED ABDERAHIM ZOUARI'S STICKING POWER (JUST NAMED AS MINISTER OF YOUTH AND SPORTS, HE HAS BEEN SHIFTED FROM MINISTRY TO MINISTRY AND WAS SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE RCD UNTIL DECEMBER 2000), DESPITE LESS THAN STELLAR PERFORMANCES, TO THE FACT THAT HE SERVED AS AMBASSADOR TO MOROCCO WHEN BEN ALI WAS MILITARY ATTACHE THERE IN THE 1970'S. THE GENERAL ASSUMPTION (USUALLY STATED AS "FACT") IS THAT ZOUARI MUST HAVE INFORMATION ABOUT BEN ALI'S PERSONAL LIFE. TUNISIAN AND DIPLOMATIC OBSERVERS HAVE REFERRED ALSO TO A POSSIBLE FAMILY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEN ALI AND THE NEW GOVERNOR OF THE CENTRAL BANK, AND BETWEEN MRS. BEN ALI AND THE NEW DIRECTOR OF TUNISIE TELECOM. SEVERAL INTERLOCUTORS SAID THAT THE NEW MINISTER OF INTERIOR ROSE RAPIDLY THROUGH THE SERVICE BECAUSE OF TIME SPENT IN BEN ALI'S HOME TOWN OF HAMMAM SOUSSE, ON THE CENTRAL COAST, DURING WHICH HE WAS REPORTEDLY ATTENTIVE TO BEN ALI'S MOTHER.

COMMENT

17. (C) APART FROM THE SPECULATION ABOUT PERSONAL TIES AND RELATIONSHIPS, WHICH WE CANNOT VERIFY, MUCH OF THE ANALYSIS MAKES SENSE. THERE IS A POSITIVE SIDE TO THE INCREASINGLY TECHNOCRATIC ADMINISTRATION--TUNISIA HAS A GREAT DEAL OF WORK TO DO IF IT IS TO MODERNIZE ITS GOVERNMENT, ECONOMY, AND EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND COMPETE IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY. ON THE POLITICAL SIDE, IT IS CLEAR THAT SOME OF BEN ALI'S CLOSEST ADVISORS DO NOT HAVE CABINET POSITIONS. SPOKESMAN ABDULLAH IS WIDELY SEEN AS THE HARD-LINER ON FREEDOM OF PRESS ISSUES; FORMER PRIME MINISTER KAROUI, WHO CURRENTLY HOLDS NO GOVERNMENT POSITION, HAS FREQUENTLY REPRESENTED BEN ALI AT INTERNATIONAL FUNCTIONS; PRESIDENTIAL COUNSELOR BEN DHIA, WHO RAN BEN ALI'S 1999 CAMPAIGN, AND WAS SEEN AS FADING, IS STILL ACTIVE IN THE POLITICAL DOMAIN. WE BELIEVE IT IS TOO EARLY TO PREDICT WHAT BEN ALI WILL DO IN 2004, BUT HE IS FIRMLY IN CONTROL OF HIS GOVERNMENT AND HIS POLITICAL PARTY, AND THERE IS NO SIGN THAT HE IS EITHER GROOMING A SUCCESSOR OR PREPARING THE PUBLIC FOR HIS DEPARTURE IN 2004. END COMMENT.

DEMING